A TIME FOR EVERYTHING
Ecclesiastes 3:1-11
December 31, 1978

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

One of the prerequisites for a successful professional football quarterback is the ability to do something everybody wishes he or she could do; namely, make time stand still. It's called using the clock; it has evolved into something of an art form; if you have enough patience you can probably see it performed sometime this afternoon. For the uninitiated, this is what it means. Football is played within a time frame, a very specific perimeter of four fifteen minute quarters. The clock runs continuously except when a player takes the ball out of bounds, or drops a forward pass, or gets injured, or when either team calls a "time-out", which it may do three times during each half. The art form appears when the losing team has the ball eighty yards away from the goal line with less than two minutes to play. The successful quarterback, under those circumstances becomes a veritable magician, orchestrating the options I have listed - sending the ball out of bounds, alternating precisely timed passes with intentional incompletions, and using his allotted time-outs with such efficiency that the two minutes go on for what seems like a nerve jangling eternity. In fact, in our household, the kitchen has learned that, "Aw, Mom, there's only a minute left", really means that dinner may be served safely in about a half an hour.

"Wouldn't it be lovely if I could live my life like that?" I think every time I see it happening. No wasted time: every second used deliberately: every minute packed with significant activity and when things slow down, the clock actually stops and time stands still. Even those who don't care for football will admit that it is an altogether lovely thought to contemplate.

We worry a lot about time; about the fact that the clock doesn't stop; about the fact that time has a way of getting away from us. The first thing we do every morning is look at a clock - the mechanism which determines every waking moment. In fact, it is the clock that has wakened us in the first place and it will pace us through each hour of activity. My watch stopped last week and I spent one day of anxiety and misery not knowing what time it was, which means not knowing what I was supposed to be doing next.

We worry, most of all, about that time called "future"; whether we will have the resources to meet the demands we see on the horizon; whether our health will sustain itself, our heart hold out, our sight and hearing remain acute. Certainly the people of Columbus, Ohio have reason to worry about the fiscal stability of their public institutions, particularly the schools. And beyond that, every thoughtful American worries about the depletion of natural resources, the pollution of the environment and the price of beef which the future promises.

Particularly on that curious holiday called New Years each of us is made aware that the clock is moving. New Years, as far as I can tell, really serves no useful purpose except that: to remind us that a certain portion of time is gone, that a new portion is in front of us. And while it is a peculiarly American custom to pull out all the stops on New Years Eve, I've never been certain whether the most exuberant New Years celebrants were laughing or crying. One thing is certain; the longer one lives, the faster the process moves. Children spend much of their time wishing the future would come: middle age people wish they could slow it down: older people wonder where it went.

Ernest Campbell, former minister of New York's Riverside Church, called it, in a colorful phrase, "The Ponce de Leon" anxiety. Ponce, you will recall, discovered

Florida, but made a name for himself because what he was really looking for was the proverbial "fountain of youth". Campbell suggests wryly that those of us who have known the heat of forty or more summers can identify with that. (The Protestant Hour, Radio Sermon, p.25)

There is no way to celebrate Christmas without spending at least some time remembering how it used to be and wondering where the years have gone. Charles Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Past returns to haunt everyone of us. And beneath it all is the basic human knowledge that the game of life, for each of us, is played within specific perimeters: there is a time of beginning and there will be a time of ending.

Carl Sandburg recorded that one of Abraham Lincoln's favorite poems was on the subject -

> "For we are the same as our fathers have been
> We see the same sights that our fathers have seen;
> We drink the same stream we feel the same sun,
> And run the same race that our fathers have run.
> The thoughts we are thinking, our fathers would think;
> From the death we are shirking, our fathers would shirk,
> To the life we are clinging, they would also cling -
> But it speeds from us all like a bird on the wing."
> (The Prairie Years, p.309, Anon.)

And Psalm 90, which the scholars call a "communal lament" speaks for us all -

> "The years of our life are threescore
> and ten
> or even by reason of strength
> fourscore:
> yet their span is but toil and
> trouble
> they are soon gone, and we fly
> away."

Over against our persistent time anxieties, our slavery to the clock, our worry about the future, the Biblical witness makes a startling proposal; namely, that time is not capricious, that the Creator God uses the clock in a way that would put Terry Bradshaw or Bob Griese to shame, that there is, in fact, a time for everything. The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes is generally a rather gloomy fellow, but he was saying something very important when he wrote -

> "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter
> under heaven:
> a time to be born, and a time to die,
> a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
> what is planted;
> a time to weep, and a time to laugh...
> He has made everything beautiful in its own time."

Now there are some troublesome theological questions which that passage presents. If God has assigned a purpose for each moment in life, why in the world doesn't He make it a little more clear? Does it mean, for instance, that Divine intent may be

read in everything that happens; that there is a time for tragedy and sickness and accidents in God's economy? Freedom - the freedom for things to go terribly awry is part of the picture too, we believe. And yet our theologians have never been able to let go of the idea of Providence; that God has a plan, a will, an intent, and that He is present and at work creatively and redemptively in everything that happens - even those things He didn't plan or want to happen. University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey, in a major and difficult work is helpful when he calls Providence the "divine creativity" in every moment of time. We know more about that in our own life experience than we shall ever learn in books of theology. Who hasn't looked back and known the "divine creativity" in personal experience? Who can't look back through time from the perspective of years and see those events which were shaped and influenced by something more than the resources and motives we brought to them? I am a minister, frankly, because a very unlikely and improbable door was closed on me one time, and while I am not much of a mystic I look back on that closing with the profoundest of gratitude, and recall vividly the despair of those days, but with thankfulness now, each time I sing that glorious hymn, "Praise ye the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation."

"Has thou not seen, How thy desires e'er have been
Granted in what he ordaineth."

You have a story like that too, probably more dramatic than mine. And what this ancient text invites you to do is to trust your story, embrace it, and see in it the gentle hand of your God, the "divine Creativity" at work in your life.

The Bible suggests that people who expect God to act in the future will be the ones who see Him and join Him in the work He has to do. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians that in the "fullness of time" God came in Jesus Christ. That's a fascinating thought. In fact, New Testament scholars and historians have long played with it and have concluded that Paul was right. - It was the best time for Jesus to be born - an unusually conducive time for the spread of a new idea throughout the world. Consider, for instance: Pax Romana, Roman peace - a highly unusual time in the violent history of western humanity; the elaborate system of Roman highways which made travel easier than it had been before or would be again for a thousand years; the dispersal of the Jews throughout the cities of Asia Minor which meant there was a synagogue in most communities; and the common Greek language, used everywhere throughout the Roman Empire. In a few short centuries after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, a remote outpost of the Empire, Rome would fall and the entire system would be dismantled. But in its place, by that time, another structure stood - the Church of Jesus Christ, which for better or worse grew as rapidly as it did because of the exquisite timeliness of the Bethlehem birth.

That is a tantalizing thought, but not an unusual one in the context of Biblical faith. People in the Bible are always watching for God to do something at the right time. In our first lesson this morning old Simeon who recognized the infant Jesus immediately as the Messiah is described as one "looking for the consolation of Israel". And the very next story in Luke's gospel is about the ancient prophetess, Anna, another person of faith who expected something great to happen.

In the Bible people of faith are open to the future, expectant, waiting for something to happen. Halford Luccock called it "Living on Tip Toe" and suggested that "nothing great ever happened without a great many lives lived in expectation." Luccock who was a professor at Yale Divinity School, suggested further that "only as we live in expectation do we live at all." (A Sprig of Holly, p.47).

Certainly the movers and shakers of human history have been those who expected great things to happen even in the most dismal of circumstances: Tom Paine, before the battle of Trenton, for instance - "These are times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in the crisis, shrink from the service of his country. But he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

My favorite is the speech Winston Churchill delivered to the boys of Harrow School in 1941. "These are not dark days: these are great days - the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us, according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race."

Part of the moral and spiritual crisis of our time is that we have stopped expecting great things of our civilization, our nation, even ourselves. I am convinced that, as a nation, we are in the process of making a very bad bargain with history, settling for survival and relinquishing a precious grasp on some very noble hopes like disarmament and world peace and the abolition of hunger. And religiously, we have abdicated - to the sect groups who are the only ones talking about the future at all. We have forgotten how to hope and expect and, again, settled for the sterile bargain of survival. Fifty years ago D.H.Lawrence wrote one of the most provocative paragraphs I have ever read. Listen to it:

"I know the greatness of Christianity: it is a past greatness. I know that, but for those early Christians, we should never have emerged from the chaos and hopeless disaster of the Dark Ages. If I had lived in the year 400, pray God, I should have been a true and passionate Christian. But now I live in 1924, and the Christian venture is done. The adventure is gone of Christianity. (Selected Essays, p.48, quoted by E. Campbell, ob.cit. p.55).

Those words haunt me every time I see a church in the process of dying from terminal boredom: or every time I see church people scurrying for safety instead of standing up in the political arena and calling racism racism and violence violence and greed greed, and all of it sin: or every time I catch myself looking with greater attention to the Buildings and Grounds account than the Community Ministries budget. There is no surer way to extinction for this or any church than to lose its ability to hope, its affinity to expect great things - even impossible things to happen.

But how, personally, to live with time, to use time, to enjoy time, to accept time gracefully. Someone once asked Robert Benchley how he managed to get so much done and still look so dissipated. He replied - "Wouldn't you love to know," and then went on to suggest that "Anyone can do any amount of work, provided it isn't the work he is supposed to be doing at that moment." (Howard F Lowry, College Talks, p.121).

Part of the answer is to relax. If God is working His purposes out and there is a season for everything, part of what the Bible invites you to do is accept, with grace, what comes at you day by day. Worry about what you can alter and influence, work hard at it, take care of yourself, but learn the difficult lesson that life will hand you some things you can't plan for or influence at all. The good news, born of our own experience, is that God will give you the resources you need

to meet whatever comes with courage and strength and grace. I cannot prove that, but I can testify on the basis of the experience of being pastor to sick and dying people that it is gloriously true.

No one ever said that better than Robert Borwning in familiar lines from Rabbi Ben Ezra -

> "Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be.
> The last of life for which the first was made;
> Our times are in his hand
> Who saith, a whole I planned
> Youth shows but half; trust God
> See all, nor be afraid."

Trust God. Face tomorrow - next week - next year with courage and gratitude and openness to what God is going to do. After all, the wreaths are still in place and the Carols have not yet faded. It was a most unusual birth we celebrated a week ago: it happened in a most unlikely place to an altogether improbable cast of characters. But God has come into this life of ours in the Christ Child - and if that event means anything it means that He promises to come again into an unlikely, improbable life like yours and mine. If it amounts to anything at all it means that the gloomy Old Testament writer was closer to the truth than even he had any right to expect.

"There is a time for every matter under heaven....I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful - in its time."

Amen.

God, our Father, our time - the days and weeks and years of our lives - are in your hand. Give us faith to trust, to reach out into a new year, knowing that You will meet us and challenge us and judge us and love us and save us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.